

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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INFO AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT

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C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 1947

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: ELAB, ECRP, AG

SUBJECT: ALGERIAN LABOR UNREST CONTINUES

REF: ALGIERS 1854 AND 1891

1. ON AUG 1, ALGIERS BUS DRIVERS STRUCK BRIEFLY. WALKOUT
SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN EFFECTIVE THROUGHOUT MUCH OF CITY.

WHEN I PAID

COURTESY CALL ON GENERAL UNION OF ALGERIAN
WORKERS (UGTA) SECY GEN BENIKOUS AUG 1, HE TOLD ME THAT
STRIKE WAS HIS NUMBER ONE CONCERN AND ENDED OUR MEETING
AFTER FIFTEEN MINUTES IN ORDER TO GO OFF WITH AIDES TO
DEAL WITH SITUATION. HIS EFFORTS SEEM TO HAVE BEEN
EFFECTIVE SINCE BUSES WERE RUNNING AGAIN BY END OF DAY
AUG 1.

2. BUS DRIVERS, WHO STAGED EFFECTIVE SLOWDOWN STRIKE
LAST WINTER, ARE BADLY PAID WITH BASE WAGE REPORTED
AS SOME \$140 PER MONTH. WHAT SETTLEMENT REACHED NOT KNOWN.

3. DURING MY CALL, BENIKOUS ADDRESSED HIMSELF BRIEFLY TO
RECENT UPSWING IN LABOR UNREST. RAILROAD STRIKE (ALGIERS
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1854), HE SAID, HAD LASTED FOR "SEVERAL DAYS" AND HAD INVOLVED ONLY ALGIERS RAILWAYMEN. STRIKE GAVE IMPRESSION OF BEING NATIONWIDE, HE ADDED, BECAUSE RAILWAYS TENDED TO COME TO STANDSTILL IF WORKERS IN CAPITAL WERE IDLE. IN MORE GENERAL TERMS, BENIKOUS BLAMED LABOR UNREST ON INFLATION, APPROACH OF HIGH FAMILY EXPENSES ASSOCIATED WITH RAMADHAN, AND SUMMER HEAT.

4. AT PRESNET, OUR UNDERSTANDING IS THAT TRAINS ARE RUNNING NORMALLY, AND THAT STRIKE REPORTED TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN PORT LAST WEEK, IF IT IN FACT HAPPENED, IS NOW OVER. WE HAVE ALSO HEARD THAT THERE IS AT LEAST PARTIAL STRIKE IN PORT OF ORAN.

5. WITH RESPECT TO GOVERNMENT'S STUDY OF SALARIES AND PRICES, INFORMED ALGERIANS BELIEVE THAT STAFF WORK HAS BEEN COMPLETED AND THAT WIDE RANGING WAGE INCREASES ARE CONTEMPLATED. ONE SOURCE TELLS US THAT STUDY, COMPLETE WITH PROPOSED WAGE HIKES, WILL BE SUBMITTED TO NATIONAL POPULAR ASSEMBLY IN OCTOBER.

6. COMMENT: SO FAR, REGIME SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN ABLE TO HANDLE LABOR UNREST WITHOUT UNDUE DIFFICULTY. ALTHOUGH THERE MAY HAVE BEEN SOME VIOLENCE CONNECTED WITH RAILWAY STRIKE, WORK STOPPAGES SEEM TO HAVE ENDED QUICKLY WITH LITTLE DISRUPTION OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN CITY.

7. STILL, STOPPAGES OBVIOUS CAUSE FOR REGIME CONCERN. ALTHOUGH BENIKOUS GRITTED HIS TEETH WHEN I SAID IT, STRIKES ARE ILLEGAL IN STATE ENTERPRISES, AND IF NUMBER OF WALKOUTS HAS BEEN ANYTHING LIKE THAT WE HAVE BEEN HEARING, IT WOULD APPEAR

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THAT WORKERS QUESTIONING GOVERNMENT'S AUTHORITY ON SCALE UNPRECEDENTED IN RECENT YEARS. SECONDLY, ALL SOURCS AGREE THAT UGTA LEADERSHIP HAS NOT SHOWN ITSELF CAPABLE OF COPING WITH SITUATION AND THE WORKERS DO NOT FIND UNION RESPONSIVE TO THEIR NEEDS. DURING DOCKERS' STRIKE IN SPRING OF THIS YEAR, ONE OF WORKERS DEMANDS IS SAID TO HAVE BEEN THAT UGTA CEASE ITS PRO-REGIME POLITICKING AND LEAVE THEM ALONE. WHILE STRIKES SO FAR HAVE NOT BEEN ON MAJOR SCALE, THEY HAVE SHOWN THAT WORKERS HAVE SOME CAPABILITY TO ORGANIZE THEMSELVES INDEPENDENT OF UNION WHOSE INDEPENDENCE FROM REGIME HAS DIMINISHED TO VANISHING POINT OVR THE YEARS.

8. OF BENIKOUS' THREE REASONS FOR STRIKES, INFLATION AND APPROACH OF RAMADHAN SEEM LOGICAL AND CLOSELY RELATED. ALTHOUGH GOVERNMENT SUBSIDIES HOLD PRICE OF MANY STAPLE COMMODITES DOWN, COST OF LIVING GENERALLY ON RISE WITH HOUSING BEING PARTICULAR PROBLEM. HIGH COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH RAMADHAN ALWAYS GIVEN LOCAL CITIZENRY PAUSE. WEATHER, HOWEVER, SEEMS IMPROBABLE EXPLANATION. AS NOTED ABOVE, LAST STRIKE OF ALGIERS BUS DRIVERS TOOK

PLACE DURING WINTER, AND THERE HAVE BEEN WORK STOPPAGES
IN VARIOUS OTHR ENTERPRISES THROUGHOUT YEAR.

9. SEVERAL LIKELY UNDERLYING CAUSES OF STRIKES SUGGEST
THEMSELVES. FIRST, AS NOTED IN ALGIERS 1891, WORKERS
PROBABLY FRUSTRATED THAT
WAGE INCREASES WIDELY EXPECTED
TO FOLLOW GOVERNMENTS REVIEW OF SALARIES AND PRICES
HAVE YET TO MATERIALIZE. SECONDLY, WIDE DISCREPANCY
BETWEEN HIGH SALARIES PAID IN FAVORED STATE COMPANIES SUCH AS
SONATRACH AND LOW WAGES OFFERED BY OTHER INSTITUTIONS LIKE CITY
BUS AUTHORITY HAS ALMOST CERTAINLY CREATED TENSION.
LASTLY, DEMOCRATIC VENEER WHICH POLITICAL DEBATE,
REFERENDUMS AND ELECTIONS HAVE GIVEN THIS
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AUTHORITARIAN STATE MAY HAVE LED GIVEN WORKERS IMPRESSION
THAT MORE OPEN EXPRESSION OF DISCONTENT WILL BE TOLERATED.

10. REGIME IS FOND OF CRUSADES, AND UNTIL NOW HAS NOT
SEEMED CONCERNED BY FAILURE OF ITS CAMPAIGNS TO PRODUCE
RESULTS. ANTI-BRUEAUCRACY DRIVE, WHICH WAS SUBJECT OF
MAJOR PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN BUT WHICH HAS AMOUNTED TO

LITTLE SO FAR, IS CASE IN POINT. WITH SALARIES AND PRICES
STUDY, HOWEVER, REGIME IS DEALING WITH VITAL ISSUE, AND IT
MAY FIND IT EXPEDIENT TO GRANT CONCRETE BENEFITS
TO WORKERS SOON.

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